Armenia

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[A] History

The history of Armenia during late antiquity, just as in the classical period, was to a large extent influenced by its geographical position as a land poised between the empires of Rome and Persia. The treaty of Rhandeia in 63 CE had set a status quo, allowing influence nominally to be shared by the two empires; although this was broken briefly by Trajan between 113 and 117 (see ARMENIA [HW51), the arrangement largely endured until the third century CE. Rome was in practice too distant to exert real and lasting influence over Armenia; the Arsacid kings of Armenia were moreover related to the Parthian royal house of Persia.

The status quo from the treaty of Rhandeia was altered dramatically by two events in the third and fourth century. In 224, the Sasanian Ardashir overthrew the last Parthian king, Artawan V. The familial ties between the Persian and Armenian royal houses were no more; the Armenians could now see themselves as 'avengers' of the deposed Parthian kings. Rome was quick to exploit the division, invading in 231/2 during the reign of Alexander Severus. Early Roman successes in Armenia were fleeting, however; Shapur I, who came to the Persian throne in 240, led a series of victorious campaigns against the Romans, culminating in the Battle of Carrhae in 260. The Arsacid royal family was forced into exile in 252/3, and Shapur set his own son Hormizd-Ardashir on the Armenian throne. Direct Sasanian rule in Armenia lasted until the accession of Trdat (Tiridates) the Great, a descendant of the exiled Arsacid kings, probably in 298/9.

Trdat's reign saw the other great shift in the Armenian status quo: the rise of Christianity. Armenia has generally been recognized as the first nation to adopt Christianity; the traditional date for Trdat's conversion is 301, although the scholarly consensus is that the conversion took place around 314. The tale of Trdat's conversion by GRIGOR (GREGORY) THE ILLUMINATOR is the subject of one of the first works of Armenian literature, the *History* or the *Life of Grigor* attributed to Agathangelos. (See 'Literature and the arts', below.) The work of Agathangelos quickly became the received tradition for later Armenian historians, but its account of a rapid and thorough conversion of the Armenians to Christianity is contradicted by the *Epic Histories* of P'awstos Buzand, which suggests a fierce struggle against Zoroastrianism that went on into the fifth century. The official adoption of Christianity, together with the rise of the new Roman capital of CONSTANTINOPLE, brought Armenia markedly closer to the Roman sphere of influence, and consequently into renewed conflict with Persia.

After the conversion of Trdat the Great, the history of Armenia falls into obscurity once again for the remainder of the fourth century. The contradictory Armenian accounts, all written sometime after 550, can only partially be reconciled with each other and with the more contemporary account of AMMIANUS MARCELLINUS. As a result, the succession of Armenian kings is only uncertainly known until the beginning of the fifth century. The history of the intervening period is dominated by the king Arshak II, who was on the throne by ca. 350 and whose reign ushered in a brief period of peace and prosperity following turbulence in the wake of Trdat's death. The peace was not to last, however; Arshak had to cope with internal fractiousness and external pressure from both Rome and Persia. His participation in the ill-fated campaign of the emperor Julian in the east in 364 led to his capture, imprisonment, and death in Persia, and the ravaging of Armenia by the armies of Shapur II. Much of the remainder of the fourth century saw weak Armenian kings, caught between the power of Persia, Rome, and the fractious Armenian noble families. After the flight of Arshak III to Ekegheats in Roman-controlled Armenia and the accession of Khosrov IV in his place, a formal partition of Armenia, known as the 'Peace of Ekegheats', was agreed between the Roman emperor THEODOSIUS I and the Persian king Shapur III around 387. Roman-controlled Armenia was absorbed into the Roman administrative system after the death of Arshak III ca. 390, and largely faded from the historical record; eastern Armenia, or 'Persarmenia' as it became known, was ruled alternately by Arsacid kings and Persian governors until 428, when the last king, Artashes, was deposed at the request of the Armenian nobility and replaced with a Persian governor.

Direct Persian rule in Armenia was initially peaceful, but with the accession of Yazdgerd II in 439, the Armenian nobility came under increasing pressure to abandon their Christianity, seen as a dangerous link to Rome; this pressure was recorded in the histories of Ghazar and Eghishe, writing in the late fifth and sixth centuries respectively. Resistance to this pressure culminated in the Armenian revolt of 450-451, led by the general Vardan Mamikonean, against the Persian governor Mihr-Narseh and his Armenian ally Vasak Siwni. The Armenian rebels were crushed in 451, but the Persians returned to a policy more tolerant of Christianity in Armenia. Periodic revolts against the Persian governors occurred throughout the fifth and sixth centuries, and members of the Armenian nobility frequently defected to the Romans, as witnessed by PROCOPIUS among others. As a result of these revolts and the attendant appeals of Christian Armenian princes to the Christian emperor of Constantinople, Armenia and the other territories of the Caucasus were frequent focal points of conflict during the Roman/Persian wars of the sixth century. The warfare was only brought to a definitive end in 591 as part of the peace treaty between MAURICE and CHOSROES II, which brought the majority of Armenian territory under Roman control for the first time. Maurice's policies in Armenia seem to have quickly alienated its nobility, and the extant Armenian sources (most notably the history attributed to the seventh-century bishop Sebeos) are very hostile to his reign. The newly Roman territories were reconquered by Chosroes II in 611, and apart from a brief period after the conquest of Persia by HERACLIUS, Constantinople would not regain significant influence in Armenia until the end of the ninth century.

[A] The church

The history of the Armenian church during this period is closely intertwined with the fortunes of its royal house, and with the larger ecclesiastical controversies of the time. The first Armenian catholicos, Grigor the Illuminator, was probably consecrated as a bishop in Caesarea around 314. He is credited with the formal establishment of the Armenian church, and it was his descendants who would thereafter lead the church as catholicoi. His son, Aristakes, attended the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea, and the catholicoi were thereafter staunchly anti-Arian. This strict adherence to Nicene orthodoxy brought the catholicos Nerses I into conflict with both Arshak II and his son Pap in the later fourth century, who adopted the Arianism of the contemporaneous Roman emperors CONSTANTIUS II and Valens. Pap's murder of Nerses in 373 led to his own murder the following year; at the same time, the murder of Nerses served to reinforce the tendency of the Armenian church leadership to consider themselves the guardians of strict Nicene orthodoxy.

The conflicting accounts of the conversion of Armenia by the extant sources suggest that Christianity reached the Caucasus through two separate routes, nearly simultaneously. Grigor the Illuminator, consecrated in Caesarea and credited by Agathangelos with the conversion of the king, represents a Greek influence on the church. The *Epic Histories* of P'awstos, on the other hand, describe a longer conversion process that had its roots in Syrian Christianity. This dual influence may also be detected in the story of the creation of the Armenian alphabet in the early fifth century. The ecclesiastical link to Syria, together with the self-image of the Armenian catholicoi as defenders of the faith of St. Grigor and of Nicaea, would eventually help to determine the course of the Armenian church, first in opposition to the Nestorians within Persia and later in opposition to the Chalcedonian creed of Constantinople.

The break with Constantinople was nevertheless a slow process. Due to the revolt of 451, no Armenian bishop was present at the Council of Chalcedon in that year, but the Armenian church did not immediately oppose the council (see CHALCEDONIAN CONTROVERSY). The more immediate threat to Armenian ecclesiastical autonomy came from the Nestorian church within Persia, and was countered with the help of Syrian Miaphysites (see CHURCHES, MIAPHYSITE; MONOPHYSITISM). No significant resistance to the council of Chalcedon can be detected until the reign of Maurice, who forcefully attempted to assimilate the new Roman territories within Armenia. The final break with the church of Constantinople came in 607. Despite a Chalcedonian minority that survived throughout the medieval period, the 'Gregorian' Armenian church remained separate thereafter.

[A] Literature and the arts

The rise of Christianity also led directly to the development of Armenian literature. One of the earliest Armenian texts, the *Life of Mashtots'* by Koriwn, recounts the invention of the Armenian alphabet in the early fifth century, and the first written translations of the Bible and other ecclesiastical texts into the Armenian language. The *Life of Mashtots'* itself was written after 450, and despite its hagiographical purpose it can be considered the first work of

Armenian historiography. Others soon followed, including the *History* of Agathangelos and the *Epic Histories* of P'awstos, both dated to the latter half of the fifth century. Early Armenian literature had an explicitly Christian purpose, and consists almost entirely of hagiography, historiography, and exegetical texts. The relatively late date of the written histories, and their evangelical mission, helps to explain much of the contradiction and mystery that surrounds the events of the fourth and early fifth centuries.

In part because of the Christianizing nature of Armenian literature, very little is known about the arts in Armenia during the late antique period. The *Epic Histories* of P'awstos give some information about the customs among the Armenian nobility of entertainment by bards, of song and of epic tales, and the later *History* of Movses Khorenats'i preserves some of these epic tales. Both histories nevertheless make it clear that the bards and their songs represented a pagan tradition that was best eradicated, and there is very little evidence to suggest that these oral traditions survived past the eighth century.

Very few examples of architecture and figural art survive from this period, and all of them have a Christian context. The churches of Ptghni (sixth-seventh century), Zvartnots, and Odzun (both seventh century) all featured relief sculptures around windows and doorways. There are also examples of carved stelae, all with Christian motifs. The stelae seem to have served a funerary or memorial purpose, and are often found on the grounds of churches. Although no mosaics or frescoes from this period are to be found in Armenia, there exists a group of floor mosaics in Jerusalem, dated to the sixth century, that bear Armenian inscriptions, and as such represent the earliest surviving use of the Armenian alphabet.

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